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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY K, 242D INFANTRY  
(42D INFANTRY DIVISION) IN AN ATTACK IN THE  
HARDY MOUNTAINS, ALSACE, FRANCE, 14-15 MARCH 1945  
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY COMPANY  
ATTACKING A NARROW WOODED RIDGE LINE  
IN MOUNTAINOUS TERRAIN

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
Index .....	1
Bibliography .....	2
Introduction .....	3
The General Situation .....	4
Preparation for the Attack .....	7
Situation and Battalion Plan of Attack .....	7
Company K Plan of Attack .....	11
Movement to the Forward Assembly Area .....	12
The Terrain .....	13
The Attack .....	14
Analysis and Criticism .....	27
Lessons .....	30
Map A - Seventh Army Offensive, 15 August - 23 November 1944	
Map B - Seventh Army Dispositions, 5 December 1944 - 21 January 1945	
Map C - Seventh Army Front, 21 January - 14 March 1945	
Map D - 42d Division Line, 17 February - 15 March 1945	
Map E - (With Insert) Battalion Zone of Attack	
Map F - The Attack	

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the preparation and the attack executed by K Company, 242d Infantry, 42d Infantry Division, in the Hardt Mountains near Bitche, France, 14-15 March 1945.

To orient the reader properly, it is necessary to recall the major events which led up to this action.

On 15 August 1944, the Seventh US Army, comprised of American and French units, successfully invaded southern France. (See Map A) (1) Rapid exploitation of the initial success led to a swift advance up the Rhone Valley. By 14 September, firm contact had been established with the Third US Army driving south, in the vicinity of Chaumont. (See Map A) (2)

The Seventh Army then swung east to the Vosges Mountains and Alsace Plain. Following a break-through at the Saverne Gap, the 2d French Armored Division made a dash for the city of Strasbourg, which was entered on 23 November. American troops followed shortly thereafter to take over the occupation of the area. (See Map A) (3)

On 24 November General Eisenhower directed the Seventh Army to swing the bulk of its force northward, in an attack designed to break through the Siegfried Line. (4) By 5

(1) A-2, p. 5; (2) A-2, p. 7; (3) A-3, p. 417; (4) A-2, p. 23.

December the Seventh Army was in position to launch this offensive, which reached the German border, and in some sectors penetrated the Siegfried Line by 16 December. (See Map B) (5)

At this point, the Seventh Army was directed to stop its advance due to the pressure of the early success of the German-Ardennes offensive in the north. To relieve the Third Army for a maximum effort against the south flank of the offensive, the Seventh Army was ordered to take up defensive positions along its present line and extend its left boundary to St Avold. (See Map B) (6)

A German offensive in the Seventh Army area during January was successful in penetrating some points along this thinly-held line. (See Map B) (7) In accordance with 6th Army Group directive, the VI Corps withdrew to positions along the Moder River. An unsuccessful attack against this line on 25 January ended the last German offensive in the Seventh Army sector. (8)

Having regained the initiative, the Seventh Army confined its activity during February and early March to a series of limited attacks and heavy patrolling, designed to straighten the army front and secure a clean line of departure for future operations. (9)

#### THE GENERAL SITUATION

On 27 January the 222d, 232d, and 242d Infantry Regiments, which had participated in the Seventh Army defensive action as Task Force Linden, were withdrawn from the line and put

(5) A-3, p. 462; (6) A-3, p. 495; (7) A-3, p. 579; (8) A-1, p. 15; (9) A-3, p. 453.

in army reserve in the vicinity of Luneville. (See Map C) These regiments which had preceded the balance of the division overseas, were reunited with their parent unit, the 42d Infantry Division, on 6 February. While in army reserve, the division was directed to initiate a comprehensive training program to iron out obvious deficiencies noted in their previous action. (10)

In fairness to the officers and men of these units, it should be noted that these deficiencies were due to lack of adequate training time in the zone of interior. Many of the officers and the bulk of the riflemen were from other branches of the service and were transferred to the division a short time before going overseas. The basic training of these men had not been thorough and unit training was practically nonexistent. This fact was known to the higher commanders and under normal conditions would have precluded the commitment of the units at this time. (11)

The 42d Division entered the line on the left flank of the VI Corps on 17 February, relieving the 45th Division in the Wingen-Wimmenau sector. (See Map D) (12) This sector had been the scene of bitter fighting during the early part of January. The German attack launched on 1 January had penetrated as far south as Wingen. Strong counterattacks and a determined offensive by the 45th Division drove the Germans back and reestablished a defensive position along the general line Althorn-Reipertswieler. (See Map D) (13)

By 17 February the situation along this front had become static and the mission assigned the 42d Division was continued

(10) A-3, p. 664; (11) A-3, p. 598; Personal knowledge, 24 November 1944; (12) A-3, p. 664; (13) A-3, p. 573, 588.

defense of this sector. The <sup>2</sup>22d and 232d Infantry Regiments moved into positions on the MLR; the 242d was put into division reserve. (See Map D) (14)

During this period, the division initiated a vigorous raid and patrolling program which was personally supervised by the division commander, Maj Gen Harry J. Collins. The mission of this program was twofold; first, to determine the enemy's strength, dispositions, and identity; secondly, it was General Collins belief that active patrolling would offset any adverse psychological effect which another period of defensive action might have on the men, and further serve to imbue them with an aggressive spirit. (15)

The 242d Infantry was ordered to relieve the 222d Infantry in the left sector of the division front on 10 March. (See Map D) This relief was completed by 0730 12 March. Thus we find the 242d Infantry disposed along a defensive line, which three days later would be used as their line of departure. (16)

On 13 March, the division received instructions that the Seventh Army would attack on 15 March. Elements of the 232d Infantry and the 117th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, which had been attached to the division, were directed to take over the sector occupied by the 242d Infantry on the night of 13 March. (17)

The division plan called for a two-regiment attack, the 222d Infantry on the right and 242d Infantry on the left. The 117th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron would support the 242d

(14) A-6, p. 2; (15) A-5, p. 36; Statement of Lt Col F. B. Alexander, Jr., then Asst G-2 42d Division, 10 Jan 1949; (16) A-6, No 13; Personal knowledge, 12 March 1945; (17) A-5, p. 43, 44, 48.

Infantry by fire initially until uncovered, then conduct reconnaissance in its zone on the left flank of the division. The 232d Infantry would regroup when uncovered and on 16 March advance in the center of the division sector. (See Map D) (18)

The initial mission of the 222d Infantry and 242d Infantry was to clear the Bitche-Hagenau Road in their sector, and be prepared to advance on order. (See Map D) (19)

#### PREPARATION FOR THE ATTACK

During the early hours of darkness on 13 March the 3d Bn, 242d Infantry, was relieved by the 117th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron and withdrew to their designated assembly area to complete preparations for the attack. (20)

The battalion closed into its area in the vicinity of Farm Geitzenthal at 2300 hours. (See Map E) Guides, who had reconnoitered the route and areas during the afternoon, led the companies into position without incident. Hot food was waiting in each company area. The men ate immediately and were bedded down as quickly as possible. (21)

The next day (14 March) a final equipment check was made. Where possible, shortages were replaced and excess equipment was loaded on the kitchen trailer. The men were given every opportunity to relax throughout the day. Their morale was exceptionally high at this point. (22)

#### SITUATION AND BATTALION PLAN OF ATTACK

At 1430 (14 March) the company commander was called to the battalion command post to receive the attack order. (23)

(18) (19) A-5, p. 43, 44, 48; (20) Personal knowledge, 13 March 1945; (21) (22) Personal knowledge, 13 March 1945; (23) Personal knowledge, 14 March 1945.



To accomplish the mission assigned to the regiment, the regimental commander had decided to attack astride the main ridge line in a column of battalions. (See insert Map E) The 3d Battalion would be the assault battalion, the 2d Battalion in immediate reserve, and the 1st Battalion would search out all towns and reduce any by-passed pockets of resistance. Therefore the mission of the regiment became the mission of the 3d Battalion initially with one slight addition, "Destroy the enemy to your immediate front." (24)

Elements of the 221st Volksgrenadier Regiment were holding the line to the immediate front. (25) Due to the nature of the shifting type of defense the Germans employed, it was difficult to make an accurate estimate of the enemy strength. (26) No information was received by the battalion commander on the estimated enemy strength opposing the battalion. (27) He did receive information, however, of a Shu-mine field directly to the front of the battalion position. (See Map E) This mine field had been laid for some time and the enemy, with the aid of "Mother Nature," had it skillfully camouflaged. The battalion commander requested engineer support in breaching this mine field. This request was approved and he was told that engineer troops would breach the mine field the night of 14 March. (28) It was also known that the enemy had a mortar position in the vicinity of Melch! (See Map E) (29)

(24) Statement of Capt C. C. DeReus, then S-3, 3d Bn, 242d Inf;  
(25) A-5, p. 43; (26) A-1, p. 22; (27) Statement of Lt Col N. W. Lousnes, then Commander 3d Bn, 242d Inf., 28 December 1948;  
(28) Statement of Lt Col N. W. Lousnes, then Bn Comdr 3d Bn, 2d Inf., 28 December 1948; (29) Statement of Capt C. C. DeReus, then S-3, 3d Bn, 242d Inf.

After a detailed reconnaissance and careful weighing of the factors involved, the battalion commander, Lt Col Neal W. Lousnes, decided to attack with two companies abreast, K Company on the right, L Company on the left. His decision was based on two main points. He, and his staff, reasoned that since the mine field extended left from the trail in front of L Company, the bulk of the manned enemy positions would probably be facing K Company. Secondly, with the engineers clearing a path through the mine field that night, L Company would have an entry into the position. With the enemy strength unknown, he favored probing the position across the entire front. I Company, in reserve, would occupy a position about 800 yards in rear of the LD. (30)

One machine-gun platoon from M Company was attached to each attacking company. The 81-mm Mortar Platoon would be in general support; the 402d Field Artillery Battalion would be in direct support of the 242d Infantry. The 117th Cavalry would support by fire until uncovered. There would be no artillery preparation, however a three-minute concentration would be fired on known targets at 0642. The known targets consisted of general front-line locations, but no specific pin-pointed positions. (31)

The flanks of the battalion would be open. The 117th Cavalry covering the Althorn-Mouterhouse road would be approximately 1 mile to the left and the 222d Infantry attacking parallel would be approximately 5 miles to the right. No lateral contact would be attempted. (32)

(30) Statement of Lt Col N. W. Lousnes, then Bn Comdr 3d Bn, 2d Inf, 28 December 1948; (31) Personal knowledge, 14 March 1945; (32) Personal knowledge, 14 March 1945.

The line of departure would be the present line held by the 117th Cavalry; H-hour, 0645 hours, 15 March 1945. (See Map E) (33)

Radio silence would be in effect from the present time until H-hour. Double-wire lines would be laid to each company observation post; lateral communication by radio. Extra ammunition would be delivered to the present assembly area at 1600 hours for distribution at the evening meal. (34)

The rifle companies were to move to their forward assembly areas immediately after dark, K Company leading, followed by L and I Companies. (35)

Transportation would move under battalion control and remain under their control until H-hour. Crew-served weapons of the rifle companies and skeleton crews would be moved to the forward assembly area prior to dark that night. M Company would move to the forward area the following morning. The attached machine-gun platoon would join K and L Companies not later than 0600. (36)

The battalion observation post would be just north of the trail on the line of departure. The command post and aid station would occupy the same position they had in the defensive area. This forward command post would open at 0500 and displace to the observation post location as soon as practicable after the attack started. The battalion train would remain in Wingen until the roads were cleared; route of advance and new location would be announced later. (See Map E) (37)

(33) (34) (35) (36) (37) Personal knowledge, 14 March 1945.

Before leaving the battalion command post the K Company company commander arranged to have the platoon leader of the attached machine-gun platoon meet him in 10 minutes, prepared to go forward on a reconnaissance. (38)

#### COMPANY K PLAN OF ATTACK

Upon his return to the company area the K Company Commander, Captain Robert W. Dyas, assembled his company officers and gave them the plan of movement to the forward assembly area. Since K Company was to lead, the executive officer was instructed to reconnoiter and mark a route from the present area to the Wingen Road. (See Map E) The supply sergeant was instructed to draw extra ammunition from the battalion supply point for distribution at the supper meal. The company commander then took his platoon leaders and the attached machine-gun platoon leaders forward on a reconnaissance. By not taking the executive officer forward on this reconnaissance, the company commander committed a grave error, although at the time it seemed the most expeditious thing to do. During the occupation of this position in the defense, the executive officer had not been with the company, consequently his only knowledge of the terrain was from a map study. (39)

The company commander issued his attack order to the platoon leaders at the completion of the reconnaissance. His plan was to lead with the 1st and 2d Platoons abreast, the 1st on the right. The 3d Platoon, in support, would remain in a defiladed position in rear of the line of departure and

(38) (39) Personal knowledge, 14 March 1945.

move forward on order. (See Map F) Since the 117th Cavalry would support by fire initially, the light machine-gun section was instructed to follow the 2d Platoon and the attached machine-gun platoon from M Company would follow the 1st Platoon, firing on targets of opportunity in their respective zones. Due to the nature of the terrain there were no suitable positions to set up the 60-mm mortars, therefore the weapons platoon leader was instructed to emplace his mortars as soon as a suitable position was uncovered the following morning. (40)

(See Map F for the following installations)

The company command post would be located in its previous position. Upon release of company transportation, the supply sergeant would establish the supply point at the trail junction approximately 700 yards in rear of the line of departure. While on reconnaissance the company commander had pointed out the battalion command post and aid station. The company observation post would be on the line of departure, between the 1st and 2d Platoons, and would advance along that axis. (41)

Upon completion of the order, the company commander returned to the company area, where he oriented the executive officer on the situation and his plan. (42)

#### MOVEMENT TO THE FORWARD ASSEMBLY AREA

Supper was served in the rear assembly area at 1730 hours. Extra ammunition and a K ration were issued at this time. (43)

(40)(41) (42) (43) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945.

At 1900 hours the company moved out along the rugged mountain trails to the forward area. (See Map E) The move was accomplished without mishap and the company closed into its forward area at 2300 hours. The men were tired from the steep climb, made doubly difficult by deep tank tracks that were soggy from recent rains. (44)

The platoons were quickly dispersed into their areas and the platoon leaders were assembled for a final briefing. The artillery forward observer, who had rejoined the company that afternoon, pointed out the concentrations that would be fired at H minus 3, and those fires that would be on call after H-hour. Since K rations had been issued for the following day, it was decided that 0545 would be early enough to awaken the men. The actual movement to the line of departure could be accomplished in approximately ten minutes, but since this was the first attack in which K Company had participated, the company commander felt that an adequate time buffer was necessary. Events the following morning proved his belief to be right, as the normal difficulty in assembling troops in darkness and a careful check of men and equipment consumed the allotted time. (45)

#### THE TERRAIN (See Map E)

To conceive properly the action which follows, it is necessary to emphasize the terrain over which it occurs.

The terrain confronting the 3d Battalion was a narrow, wooded ridge line which climbed in altitude approximately 450 feet, a distance of 800 yards on both sides. A poor

(44) (45) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945.

trail running generally along the topographical crest, split the center of the ridge and formed a natural boundary between companies. The line of departure, which was the MLR, offered no particular advantage to K Company, except as a line of coordination. A small spur running across the right sector of the company area, approximately 150 yards forward of the lines of departure, masked the supporting fires in that zone. There were numerous small rises in the ground throughout the front which offered excellent protection against small-arms fire. Unfortunately, they also masked the fire of K Company weapons. (46)

The terrain in front of L Company, although not as precipitous as that in K Company, was more heavily wooded. Directly in rear of the mine field the woods were extremely dense, <sup>and</sup> ~~which~~ offered excellent concealment to the enemy. (47)

The enemy positions had been skillfully camouflaged. Approaches into their position were limited and as will be pointed out, were well covered. (48)

#### THE ATTACK

By 0640 15 March, the 1st and 2d Platoons of K Company were in position just in rear of the line of departure. Close liaison had been maintained with the 117th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron; so contact with them and passage through the line was a routine matter. They had no additional enemy information and reported no activity in their sector during the night. (49)

(46) (47) (48) (49) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945.

At H minus 3 the artillery fired their concentrations and at 0645 the leading elements of K Company crossed the line of departure. The movement across the line resembled the ~~X~~ jumpoff in a field exercise. Their rapid movement presented a problem of control which the platoon leaders failed to recognize until too late. (50)

No fire was received from the enemy positions, so they continued their aggressive movement for approximately 150 yards. At this point, the 2d Platoon drew heavy rifle fire and machine-pistol fire from the woods in the L Company area. (See Point A, Map F) The platoon returned this fire as they deployed. (51)

The 1st Platoon had not received fire on the opening volley; however, in their minds the enemy position was definitely established and the leading squads started to close on Point A. (See Map F) This spontaneous reaction, although quite natural, was a serious mistake, and a major factor in the confusion, delay and heavy casualties which followed. As the platoon closed on Point A, machine guns from an undetermined position in the vicinity of Point B (See Map F) opened fire on them. At the same time the riflemen at Point A were covering them with accurate fire. There was a small rise of ground about 50 yards in front of the enemy position which masked their return fire. By crawling forward near this rise of ground, they did, however, get cover from the fire of the enemy riflemen. The machine guns continued to rake the area with sporadic bursts, but this ground also offered them protection from fire, although the slightest upright movement was tantamount to suicide. (52)

(50) (51) (52) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945.



When the company commander realized the situation of the 1st Platoon, he ordered the platoon leader to move his support squad forward along the proper axis of advance, locate the machine-gun position, and direct the fire of this squad to neutralize it; at the same time he told the artillery forward observer to call for a concentration on Point B. (53)

As the forward observer was calling for the artillery, the company commander received a message from the 2d Platoon stating that the platoon leader had been seriously wounded and the platoon had suffered many casualties. He went immediately to the 2d Platoon area where he discovered a situation as tangled and confused as that of the 1st Platoon. In addition to the platoon leader being a casualty, the platoon sergeant had also been wounded. (54)

When the 2d Platoon had deployed initially, the left squad moved too far to the left. As they started to close on Point A, by fire and maneuver, they were caught in the mine field. (See Map F) The casualties in this squad from mines and small-arms fire was nearly one hundred per cent. The platoon leader immediately committed his support squad on the right flank and in leading them into position, was seriously wounded. The platoon sergeant took charge and attempted to move the platoon forward. As the two remaining squads started forward, they also ran into mines. He then discovered that the mine field did not end at the trail as reported, but extended diagonally to the right rear. The enemy had been covering this area with sporadic mortar fire (53) (54) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945.

and a tree-burst from a mortar round had wounded the platoon sergeant. The platoon guide had done nothing about taking charge of the platoon and the only action in this area consisted of the men trying to find cover from the mortar fire. The company commander ordered the platoon guide to reorganize the platoon and resume firing. (55)

The company commander then returned to his observation post, where he was informed by the artillery forward observer that his artillery mission would not be fired, because of the close proximity of the troops. He checked the coordinates of the leading elements with the forward observer and they both felt that the safety factor was more than adequate. The forward observer was told to request the mission again. This request, like the first one, was disapproved. (56)

Since two platoons of his company were deployed facing Point A, the company commander considered the possibility of overrunning this position. This would need the approval of the battalion commander and meant that L Company's location would have to be definitely established. Many conflicting reports had been received on the progress of L Company. The engineer troops, who were supposed to have cleared a lane through the mine field the night before, had never arrived. The battalion commander had again requested engineer support early that morning. Finally, on order from the division commander, the engineer troops were dispatched to the 3d Battalion. This caused a considerable delay in the advance of L Company. (57) Radio contact was nonexistent

(55) (56) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945; (57) Statement of Lt Col N. W. Lousnes, then 3d Battalion Commander, 28 December 1948.

between these companies due to the terrain and woods, therefore the company commander decided to contact personally the company commander of L Company. (58)

A lull had developed in the fighting by this time, although any movement drew heavy fire. The enemy continued to search the area with sporadic mortar fire. The company commander informed the executive officer of his plan to contact L Company and ask the executive officer to see if he could get artillery fire on Point B. He further stated, that if the fire was approved, to hold it until he gave the order. The division assistant G-3 was with the executive officer at the time and said he would see what he could do about getting artillery fire. (59)

Just as the company commander started for L Company's position, the enemy laid down a heavy mortar barrage. This barrage took a heavy toll of casualties; among them was the company commander, Capt Dyas. His action at this time reflected the courage which made him an outstanding combat leader. Realizing that the executive officer had limited knowledge of the terrain, and the present disposition of the troops, he ran back to the observation post and, with the help of the communication sergeant, prepared a sketch showing the present situation. He then ran back to the command post, which was now located on the line of departure, and oriented the executive officer on his plan. He stated that he had not issued any instructions to the 3d Platoon. After the executive officer moved forward, he then went to the aid station for treatment. (60)

(58) (59) (60) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945.

Nothing had been mentioned about supporting fire during this action. Actually there wasn't any up to this point. All requests for artillery fire were disapproved, and for reasons unknown, the company commander had not called on the 81-mm mortar forward observer for supporting fire. The Light Machine-Gun Section and the attached machine-gun platoon had followed the leading platoons and were giving some support, but the enemy positions were well concealed and the machine-gun fire had been ineffective. The Weapons Leader was still unable to employ the 60-mm mortars. (61)

The executive officer (who will be referred to as the company commander hereafter) moved forward to what he thought was the observation post. The first unit contacted however was the 1st Platoon. The platoon leader pointed out the machine-gun position at Point B and the disposition of his platoon. He stated that Captain Dyas had informed him of his intended plan to take Point A. The company commander made a quick visual reconnaissance of the area, then proceeded to the observation post where he contacted the 2d Platoon by radio. The enemy had continued to blanket this area with mortar fire and each barrage was taking its toll in casualties. The platoon guide was instructed to pull his platoon back from the mine field to a safer position where he could still deliver fire on the forward positions of Point A, and to report his effective strength as soon as possible. (62)

(61) (62) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945.

The enemy had increased the intensity of his mortar fire, despite the counterbattery fire of the division artillery. It was apparent that their observers knew the exact disposition of the troops and they were systematically blanketing the area with this pattern. The only safety lay ahead. (63)

To carry out Captain Dyas' (the original company commander) proposed plan it was essential to know the exact location of L Company. The battalion commander was contacted by radio, which was now the only means of communication, as mortar fire had cut the wire lines in many places. He stated that the engineers had cleared a path through the mine field and part of L Company had already advanced 150 yards beyond that point. He stressed the urgency of getting the attack moving again. The division and regimental commanders were with him at this time and they were desirous of pushing the attack forward immediately. The battalion commander said he was going to L Company to see how they were progressing and then would come to the K Company area to give any assistance he could. What he found in L Company was somewhat different than had been reported. The battalion S-3, who had preceded him to L Company, quickly oriented him on their situation. The engineers had cleared a path and two squads had gone through, but they stopped suddenly in some heavy brush just beyond the mine field. One of the men had been hit by what was believed to be an S-type antipersonnel mine and the men "froze" on their positions. Engineers immediately started

(63) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945.

probing this area, but enemy fire from Point A made this work exceedingly difficult. (64)

The location of L Company, as given to the K Company commander, brought about an entirely different situation. That location would put L Company well into the woods at Point A. Since K Company was still receiving fire from this position, it was assumed that L Company had breached the mine field further to the north than was originally planned, and hadn't completely cleared the wooded area. (65)

It was now approximately 0945. The company commander sent for the platoon leaders of the 3d Platoon, Weapons Platoon, and attached Machine-Gun Platoon. He then had the communication sergeant instruct the 2d Platoon guide to withdraw his platoon to a covered position and report to the 1st Sergeant. The 2d Platoon guide informed the Communications Sergeant that his effective strength was himself and one other man. The balance of the platoon were casualties. The 1st Sergeant was ordered to form litter-bearer teams from any available men and have the 2d Platoon guide evacuate the casualties from that area. (66)

When the platoon leaders of the 3d, Weapons and attached Machine-Gun Platoon arrived at the observation post, the company commander gave them the following instructions: The 3d Platoon would move up on the right flank of the company zone and overrun the enemy positions at Point B. The attached Machine-Gun Platoon would move to positions where it could direct the fire of all guns on the enemy machine-gun

(64) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945; Statement of Captain C. C. DeReds, then S-3, 3d Battalion, 2 January 1949; (65)  
(66) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945.

positions. The Light Machine-Gun Section would follow the 3d Platoon and fire on any targets that might develop on its right flank. Speed of action was emphasized. (67)

The area through which the 3d Platoon would move, was extremely narrow, and the most sparsely wooded area on the ridge. The platoon leader expressed grave doubt about the success of the movement. This same doubt had passed through the company commander's mind, but all factors being considered, it was the best line of action under the circumstances. (68)

It was about 1000 hours when the platoon leaders left the observation post. The battalion commander was informed of the plan of action, which he approved. A smoke concentration was requested to screen the movement of the 3d Platoon. He stated that he could not get any artillery fire, and again stressed the urgency of moving immediately. The company commander turned to the 81-mm observer for smoke. He then discovered that the forward observer and his radio operator had been knocked out by mortar fire. With the wire lines out, there was no direct contact with the Mortar Platoon. The only channel of communication was by radio, through the battalion commander, as his was the only radio in the battalion net that K Company could contact. It was decided that this would consume too much time, and time was the essence of this move. (69)

The 3d Platoon leader had <sup>altered</sup> ~~altered~~ his platoon prior to meeting the company commander, consequently a radio message

(67) (68) (69) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1948.

to the platoon sergeant was all that was necessary to start the platoon forward. They moved up rapidly in a column of squads. The attached Machine-Gun Platoon had moved into position despite considerable rifle fire. The Light Machine-Gun Section was ready and waiting for the 3d Platoon. (70)

As the head of the 3d Platoon reached Point X, they were fired on by machine guns from Point C and riflemen from Point A. (See Map F) The light machine guns went into action against this position, but they were unable to neutralize it. One section of heavy machine guns, from their positions in the 1st Platoon area, shifted their fire to this position, but this also was ineffective due to poor observation. The 3d Platoon leader requested artillery fire and smoke on this position. The company commander told him there was no artillery available and instructed him to move a rifle grenadier into position to fire on Point C with a white phosphorous grenade. At the same time the men of the 1st Platoon, deployed parallel to the trail, were told to throw white phosphorous hand grenades in front of their positions. (71)

The squad leader of the leading squad of the 3d Platoon worked himself forward to a position about 75 yards from the machine gun at Point C. From this position, he made a direct hit on the emplacement with his first round. In the meantime, the squad leader of the 2d Squad had, on his own initiative, moved his squad very rapidly over precipitous terrain to a position on the flank of the enemy emplacement. When the

(70) (71) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945.



smoke from the white phosphorous grenade screened the enemy observation, the 2d Squad quickly overran the position. (72)

The platoon deployed immediately and started moving forward toward Point B, delivering a heavy volume of fire, much of which was wild and ineffective. As they came abreast of the 1st Platoon, they were fired on by machine guns and riflemen from Point B; at the same time the enemy laid down a heavy mortar barrage on this position. The men hit the ground, seeking any cover available. The company commander, realizing the danger of stopping at this point, moved over to the 3d Platoon to get them started forward again. His action, however, was unnecessary. When the 3d Platoon deployed, Sergeant George A. Carpenter, Assistant Squad Leader of the 3d Squad, ended up with the 1st Platoon. He evidently sensed the danger of stopping at this point and with total disregard for his own safety, stood up and shouted, "Let's get 'em!" (73)

Sergeant Carpenter's action was all that was needed to start the men forward. With a heavy volume of assault fire, they closed the remaining distance and overran the enemy position. The position was mopped up quickly, but a heavy enemy mortar barrage forced the men to take cover before they could reorganize. The barrage turned out to be one of short duration and reorganization was started immediately. (74)

A final casualty check of the 3d Platoon showed a total of two casualties: one man slightly wounded, and Sergeant

(72) (73) (74) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945.

Carpenter, who had been wounded by a tree-burst from a single round that came in sometime after the position had been taken. The smoke screen which had been built up by the 1st Platoon, small and weak as it was, had been a great help to the 3d Platoon. However, the aggressiveness of this platoon and the courage and skill displayed by the small-unit leaders, was mainly responsible for the quick success and minimum casualties. (75)

It was about 1030 hours when the position was taken. The company commander informed the battalion commander and reported that his casualties had been heavy. The battalion commander was well aware of this fact, having been in the 1st and 2d Platoon areas. He stated that I Company had been ordered to pass through K Company. Although no retaliatory fire had been received since the position had been taken, he anticipated the probability of more mortar fire, and was greatly concerned about the casualties still waiting to be evacuated. He told the K Company commander to call on the S-1 if he needed any help. This was not necessary, however, as the Weapons Platoon leader had been given the task of evacuation and the work was being expedited. (76)

Ammunition was brought forward and distributed immediately. The 1st Sergeant had completed the casualty count by the time the company commander reached the 2d Platoon area. In checking the 2d Platoon casualties, it was noted that their effective strength was 14, instead of 2 as previously reported. As it turned out this erroneous report had no bearing on the final action, but had Captain Dyas' plan

(75) (76) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945.

of action been adopted, it would undoubtedly have been abandoned on the basis of this report. (77)

I Company passed through K at 1100 hours. When they had cleared the area the K Company commander visited the casualties still awaiting evacuation. Many of these men were seriously wounded and needed immediate treatment. Evacuation to regiment was over rough trails, which would only add to the shock already suffered by these men. Had it not been for the skillful and inspired work of the Battalion Surgeon, Harry J. Zell, some of these men would not have survived this action. The support given by all members of the Medical Detachment throughout this action was outstanding. (78)

Because of the heavy casualties suffered by the 1st and 2d Platoons, they were merged temporarily into one platoon under command of the 1st Platoon leader. The final casualty count in K Company was 6 dead, 48 wounded; a tragic price to pay for any ground. Two of the wounded died in evacuation channels, bringing the total dead to 8. The enemy sacrifice was small; K Company had killed 10 and captured 7. An undetermined number withdrew before the position was taken. (See Map F) (79)

Prior to moving forward, the platoon leaders were instructed to make a thorough search of their area for abandoned equipment and ammunition. The search was conducted in haphazard manner and was inadequately supervised by all commanders. This fact was discovered later in the day, when a count of automatic rifles disclosed a shortage. The supply

(77) (78) (79) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945.

sergeant and two men were sent back the following morning to recover the abandoned equipment. (80)

At 1130 hours K Company moved out along the ridge line, shortly thereafter contacting the rear elements of M Company. The battalion continued moving along the ridge line toward the high ground overlooking the Bitche-Haguenau road near Baerenthal, which was their next objective. (81)

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

From a purely technical standpoint this action could be considered successful, for the assigned mission was accomplished. However, in the eyes of those who participated in this action and in the judgement of our superiors, the price paid was much too high. Many factors which contributed to the high casualty rates were unavoidable; on the other hand remedial action was too slow.

In my opinion the battalion commander started the attack with too much strength. His decision to probe on the entire front, though sound, depended on engineer support for complete success and this support arrived too late to be effective. In view of the unknown enemy strength, the narrowness of the front, and the known mine field, I believe he should have initiated the attack with a column of companies. In this manner the situation could have been developed with a minimum amount of personnel and the battalion commander could have then influenced the course of action maneuver.

Since the decision was made to attack with two companies abreast, the K Company commander should have attacked with one platoon leading. This was dictated by the terrain and narrow frontage. *what was a disadvantage.*

(80) (81) Personal knowledge, 15 March 1945.

As previously pointed out, the loss of control when crossing the line of departure was one of the major reasons that the attack was stalled. Had the 1st Platoon maintained its proper direction of advance, it is believed that they would have achieved the same results as the 3d Platoon.

L Company's failure to push the attack after the mine field had been breached was the result of poor judgement and lack of aggressiveness on the part of the leaders concerned in that company. It is understandable why men would hesitate to move through underbrush when they believed mines were present, but the failure of their leaders to take positive action at this time cannot be overlooked. Actually no mines were present in this area. What was believed to be an S-type mine was in reality a hand grenade thrown from the enemy position.

Both the initial K Company commander and the succeeding commander wasted valuable time considering the possibility of moving into the L Company area. They had been assigned an objective and all of their plans should have been made on the basis of that mission. The 2d Platoon should have been withdrawn much earlier than they were. Their position was untenable and the actual value of their fire was negligible.

The lack of supporting fire not only contributed to the delay in regaining the initiative, but it also had a definite effect upon the morale of the men. The reason no artillery support was given was not due to the closeness of the troops to the target area, as this safety factor was adequate; but because of the angle of the trajectory coming into the target

area, it was feared that some of the rounds would result in tree-bursts over our own troops. I feel this was a calculated risk that should have been taken. The fire of the 81-mm Mortar Platoon should have been utilized instead of wasting valuable time trying to get artillery fire.

Lack of control and indecisive action on the part of small-unit leaders in the 1st and 2d Platoons was the main reason that the attack was stalled. Their weakness in this action was due, in part, to inexperience and lack of training. The 1st Platoon leader was commissioned in the field and this was his first action. His failure was one of decision and not due to <sup>lack of</sup> courage or lack of aggressiveness. The failure of the 2d Platoon guide was his lack of capacity for leadership. Had training been more realistic and situations of this type been stressed, his inability to act under pressure would have probably been discovered and he could have been placed in a position of lesser responsibility.

The action of the 3d Platoon is a fine example of the effectiveness of a well-controlled platoon. Their aggressiveness and the coordination between the squads reflected the outstanding leadership of all leaders in this platoon. Their single weakness in this action was poor fire discipline. Had the enemy been able to counterattack, this platoon would have been forced to withdraw because of a shortage of ammunition.

Too much time was lost in the evacuation of casualties. Additional litter-bearer teams were sent to the battalions, but due to the heavy casualties, they were inadequate. A company SOP on casualty evacuation and recovery of equipment would have saved prolonged suffering among the casualties and much time in policing equipment.

The enemy conducted his defense in a skillful manner. With an inferior force he was able to hold up the advance of a battalion for nearly four hours. It is believed that the machine-gun position at Point C (See Map F) was unoccupied initially. His timely occupation of this position was nearly successful in stopping the advance of the 3d Platoon.

To sum up the results of this action: K Company did accomplish its assigned mission. True, the casualty rate was high, but it should be realized that many of these were the result of mines. From the lessons learned in this action, the small-unit leaders of this company developed into excellent combat leaders. The pursuit which followed the capture of this position was so rapid that the enemy was unable to regroup and organize a line of resistance at any point in front of the Seigfried Line. Many fully equipped enemy troops were cut off and captured. All points being considered, it should be concluded that the attack was successful.

### LESSONS

Some of the lessons brought out in this action are:

1. When the enemy situation is unknown, his position should be developed with the minimum number of troops.
2. Once a unit is halted by enemy fire, quick decisions followed by aggressive action, is essential to regain the initiative.
3. Fire discipline must be stressed throughout all phases of training and carried on in combat.
4. Reorganization is a continuous problem and must be effected whenever the need arises.

5. Small-unit leaders should be indoctrinated with the necessity of accurate and timely reports.

6. Small units should anticipate the administrative problems to be faced in combat and provide standing operating procedure to cover them.

7. Supporting fire should be given to units, where position becomes untenable, even though it involves a calculated risk.

8. All leaders should be thoroughly indoctrinated with the capabilities of the weapons of their command, and to utilize them to their full extent.

9. Company and platoon commanders should improvise realistic training methods to test the ability of their non-commissioned officers to act under pressure, and replace those who do not measure up to standard, prior to combat.

10. When pinned down by an inferior enemy force, safety lies forward.

11. The loss of leaders is a normal part of combat and the next in line in the chain of command must assume his responsibility and continue the mission without hesitation.



